

# Catullus 22: on (not) judging a book by its cover

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Catullus 22 is a playful attack on a bad poet, Suffenus. But is Catullus' relationship to Suffenus so straightforward? Might Catullus be satirizing himself as well?

Like many of Catullus' shorter poems, this one is deliberately casual in manner – the language is chatty and colloquial, and the addressee, Varus, seems to have been one of the poet's closer friends. But the flip-pant, jokey tone shouldn't deceive us into thinking that this is just a throw-away skit on the absurd literary pretensions of a mutual acquaintance: a close reading suggests that there's more going on here than meets the eye.

Catullus is careful, in the opening line, to distance himself from his victim, Suffenus, who is characterized as a friend-of-a-friend – perhaps on the fringes of the poet's circle, but not part of the real in-crowd. At first, though, we're led to think that he's a pretty impressive and likeable character: the word translated here as 'cool' is one of the poet's highest terms of approval, *urbanus* (literally, 'urbane' or 'of the city' – that is, chic, smart, sophisticated, in contrast to the clod-hopping ways of the rustic and the provincial). For good measure, Catullus adds two further buzz-words drawn from the set of terms he applies elsewhere to the stylish manners and the stylish, clever poetry he idealizes: *uenustus* ('smart' or 'charming') and *dicax* ('witty'). But now comes the catch: Suffenus isn't just a funny guy, he also fancies himself as a writer – and here he just gets it wrong, in Catullus' terms. His first mistake is to churn out reams and reams of the stuff, something that our poet condemns in several other poems as the mark of a rank amateur. The real poet (at least, the real poet of Catullus' stamp, one writing in the playful, hyper-sophisticated style pioneered by the Hellenistic Greek writer Callimachus) aims for quality rather than quantity, spending years polishing and revising before publishing *anything at all*. Suffenus, on the other hand, goes straight to press: no scraps of paper for him, but the *de luxe* editions described in detail by Catullus in lines 6–8.

## First impressions

The detail here is arguably significant, a

*Varus: that mate of yours, Suffenus  
is so cool – he's smart and witty –  
but he writes far more poetry than anyone else!  
I reckon he's composed 10,000 lines or more,  
not scribbled down on scraps, the way you do – 5  
oh no, his paper's top quality, rolls brand new,  
new rollers, red laces and parchment covers,  
lead-ruled and tidied up with pumice-stone.  
But when you read this stuff, well – that super-cool  
Suffenus seems like he should be milking a goat 10  
or digging ditches: what a change, a transformation!  
What to make of this? The guy who just now seemed  
like a stand-up comic, or wittier, if possible,  
is more ham-fisted than a ham-fisted yokel  
the minute he starts a poem – and he's never 15  
so happy as when he's scribbling away!  
He's so pleased with himself, loves himself so much.  
Well, I guess we all make the same mistake – there's no-one  
who isn't a bit of a Suffenus in some way or other.  
We all have our own special failings; 20  
but you can't see the bit of the bag that's on your back.*

point we'll come back to, but perhaps needs some explanation for the modern reader. 'Books' at this date were, of course, rolls of papyrus, rather than bound sets of paper pages. The roll would consist of a long strip of papyrus, on which the text was written in vertical columns; the end of the strip was attached to a roller, around which it could be wound up, and then gradually unrolled again in the process of reading. *De luxe* editions, like Suffenus', might have leather thongs or laces to tie the roll closed, and a parchment cover or dust-jacket to protect it on the shelf; as a finishing touch, the rough edges of the papyrus could be rubbed with pumice to give the roll a neat appearance. The 'lead' mentioned by Catullus was a disc (something like a modern pastry- or pizza-wheel) used to rule guide-lines for

the scribe – again, helping to ensure a neat appearance in the finished manuscript.

As Catullus emphasizes in lines 9–11, though, the elegant look of Suffenus' poetry books is deceptive: the *contents* of these posh volumes are anything but elegant. In fact, you'd think these 'poems' had been written by a country bumpkin – someone fit only to dig ditches or milk goats – not a smart, city wit like Suffenus (the word *scurra*, translated here (line 13) as 'stand-up comic', originally meant a kind of jester or buffoon, but was also applied at this date to the amateur 'wit'; it had strong associations with the smartness of the city-dweller, as opposed to the 'ham-fisted yokel' with whom Suffenus is compared in line 14).

Catullus professes himself utterly bemused (line 12) by the contradiction

between Suffenus' social sophistication and literary ham-fistedness, but seizes the opportunity to get in another dig at his victim: Suffenus is 'never I so happy as when he's scribbling away!' It's not just Suffenus' dismal poetry that makes him a laughing-stock, but his lack of self-awareness – a fault for which several of our poet's other targets are mocked without mercy. Writing terrible poetry is bad enough – but to be *pleased* with oneself for doing so compounds the crime!

### Takes one to know one

In lines 18–21, however, Catullus concludes the poem with a surprise twist. Generally speaking, he's not a writer to pull his punches, and the targets of his invective (or 'insult') poetry are rarely let off without a comprehensive put-down. But Suffenus gets away relatively lightly, in so far as Catullus turns around in the concluding lines and admits (or *seems* to admit) that he's not perfect either: 'I guess we all make the same mistake', he says (line 18); you could criticize any of us for being a bit of a Suffenus in some way or other. The last line refers to one of Aesop's fables: when the human race was first created, each of us was given a bag in two parts, one of which contains other people's faults, and hangs down in front of us, whereas the other part, containing *our own* faults, hangs behind our back where we can't see it. Moral: it's easy to criticize others, but not so easy to see your own shortcomings.

What, then, are we, as readers, to make of the unusually genial conclusion to this poem? One way of answering that question is to 'cross-reference' poem 22 with another poem in which Catullus implicitly correlates a book's external appearance with its contents – the very first poem in the collection, a dedication to the contemporary historian and biographer Cornelius Nepos. Here, it's the presentation copy of Catullus' *own* work which is described in terms quite reminiscent of Suffenus' *de luxe* editions:

*To whom do I give this smart new booklet  
just polished with dry pumice-stone?  
To you, Cornelius: for you used  
to think something of my trifling  
verse ...*

Of course, there are contrasts as well as parallels between the two poems. Crucially, Catullus' poems are contained in a 'booklet', not a huge tome – suggesting small-scale, carefully-crafted verse, unlike the thousands of lines churned out by Suffenus. At the same time, the booklet is 'new', 'smart', 'polished' – all terms that could be applied metaphorically to its content as well as literally to the external appearance of the roll presented to Cornelius. The sympathetic reader will

assume that in *this* case form and content are in harmony: the elegant external appearance of the book reflects the elegant verse contained in it. But if we come back to this poem after reading 22, we might begin to wonder whether the poet isn't just a little guilty of the same crass self-satisfaction of which he accuses Suffenus: 'he's so pleased with himself, loves himself so much'.

Perhaps, then, the ending of poem 22 is Catullus' way of forearm-ing himself against any such criticism. By pointing out that we're all blind to our own faults, he appears disarmingly honest about the possibility that the 'smartness' of his own booklet, like that of Suffenus' volumes, may be no more than skin-deep; yet at the same time, he succeeds in demonstrating his own self-awareness, in *contrast* to Suffenus' ridiculous smugness. Like Socrates, who is said to have prided himself on the fact that he at least *knew* that he knew nothing, Catullus portrays himself as, ironically, *aware* that he has shortcomings he can't see. In this way, he manages once again to contrast himself with Suffenus, even while dangling in front of the reader the tantalizing possibility that they may be more alike than he'd care to admit.

We might think of Catullus' Suffenus as, simultaneously, an *alter ego* and a foil – just a little too like the poet for comfort, yet sharply differentiated from him by that fatal lack of self-awareness. The *apparent* climb-down at the end of poem 22 is strategic: we're being *manoeuvred* into seeing the poet as charmingly self-deprecating, as admirably self-aware. Whether we, as readers, agree to play along – whether we *allow* Catullus to charm us, or find him high-handed and manipulative – is ultimately up to us.

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